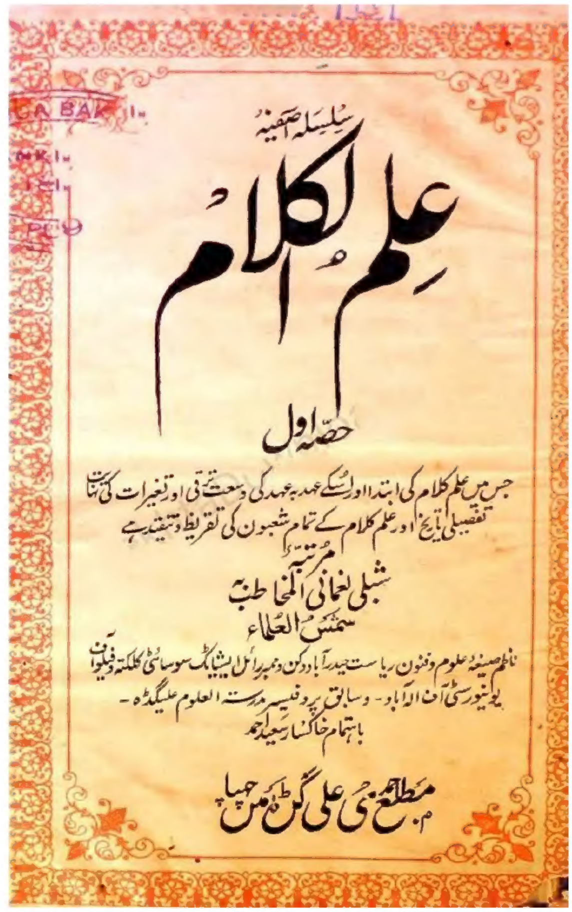
Ilm-ul-Kalam

Ilm-ul-Kalam (Urdu: علم الكلام) is a 20th-century historical study of classical Kalam written by Shibli Nomani and serves as the second work in his series on Kalam. The book focuses on the theological debates between the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite schools, with brief references to the Maturidite tradition. Shibli expressed sympathy toward Mu'tazilite rationalism and presented critical views on Ash'arite and traditionalist interpretations. Because of these views, the work received limited acceptance among the ulama, and a fatwa of takfir was issued against him. Despite this, the book is recognized in academic circles for its analytical discussion and originality. Later, Shibli wrote another related work, *Al-Kalam*, in which he presented his own modern interpretation of theology, considered an early effort to develop a 'new Kalam'.

Ilm-ul-Kalam



Urdu cover

Author	Shibli Nomani
Original title	علم الكلام
Language	Urdu
Series	Kalam series
Subject	Kalam
Genre	History
Published	1902
Publication place	British India
Media type	Print
OCLC	1193190097 (https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1193190097)

Background

Shibli Nomani wrote *Ilm-ul-Kalam* at a time when Western science and philosophy were influencing educated Muslims in India. As many began to believe that religion and reason could not coexist, Shibli aimed to show that Islam possessed its own rich tradition of rational theology.[1] His interest in theology began during his years at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh. In 1895, he published an article titled *'Itizal wa al-Mutazilah'* in the magazine *Tehzeeb-ul-Akhlaq*, which explored the origins and principles of the Mu'tazilite school.[2] He continued to study related subjects, developing a broader understanding of the evolution of Islamic theological thought.[3]

Following the death of Syed Ahmad Khan in 1898, Shibli resigned from his post at Aligarh and joined the Department of Education in the princely state of

Dewey Decimal	297.2
LC Class	BP166.1 .S517 1949
Preceded by	*Al-Kalam*
Followed by	*Al-Ghazali*
Text	*Ilm-ul-Kalam (https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/detail/ilm-ul-kalam-shibli-nomani-ebooks-1)* online

Hyderabad. His first work in the Kalam series from this period was a study of *Al-Ghazali*, focusing on al-Ghazali's life and theological views. He then began composing *Ilm-ul-Kalam*.[4]

Despite his declining health, Shibli completed the book in February 1902.[5] Some sections, such as his discussion of the Maturidi school—the Hanafi branch of theology—are relatively brief because of the limited availability of sources on the topic.[5] Using classical works such as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, *al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islam wa al-Zandaqah*, *al-Kalam ala al-Muhassil*, *Rawmantiq*, *Kitab al-Ruh*, and *Sharh Mawaqif al-Sadat*, he structured *Ilm-ul-Kalam* as a systematic account of the development of Islamic theology and its subfields.[5]

Shibli initially planned to publish *Ilm-ul-Kalam* alongside another work titled *Al-Kalam*, which would present his own modern theological ideas. Later, he decided to release *Ilm-ul-Kalam* separately and postponed the completion of *Al-Kalam*.[6] The book was translated into Bengali language by Muhammad Abdullah, a professor at the University of Dhaka, and published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh in 1981.[7]

Synopsis

The book focuses on the history, development, and influence of Kalam rather than serving as a treatise on the discipline itself.[8] Shibli begins by explaining the necessity and usefulness of Kalam, its origins, and its gradual evolution across eras. He outlines principles for writing its history, noting that while authors may adopt their own style, they must preserve the foundational principles established by the early scholars (Salaf).[9] The book presents the beliefs and doctrines of major theological schools, including the Mu'tazilism, Ash'arism, and Maturidism, and highlights the differences among them. Notable events and circumstances in the lives of theologians are also recorded.[8]

The work is organized into four parts. The first traces the beginnings and historical development of Kalam. The second examines its relationship with doctrines and philosophy, discussing both advantages and limitations. The third presents biographies of key theologians, while the fourth describes the modern style of Kalam and its significance.[10]

Shibli also addresses the reasons for differences in Islamic beliefs and chronicles the compilation, propagation, and opposition of Kalam up to the fifth century Hijri.[11] He provides detailed discussions of Ash'arite Kalam, citing the works and achievements of scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and examines the role in Kalam of figures including Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymiyya, and Shah Waliullah Dehlawi. The ideas of Islamic philosophers, such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Miskawayh, and Suhrawardi, are also discussed.[11]

Throughout the book, Shibli engages with philosophical arguments that challenged Islamic doctrines, responding to them comprehensively within the framework of Islam.[10] The work concludes with a concise commentary on the science of Kalam, discussing its merits and continued relevance.[8]

Intra-school debate

Shibli emphasized the use of reason in interpreting religious beliefs and Sharia rulings, including the analysis of Quranic verses and Hadith.[12] In his historical assessment, he appeared to show greater appreciation for the Mu'tazilism.[12] He described them as an intellectual group devoted to truth and service to Islam, while portraying the traditionalist scholars (Muhaddithin) as more rigid and prone to error. He also noted that some jurists and Muhaddithin shared Mu'tazilite perspectives.[12]

Shibli was also critical of the Ash'arism. He considered their doctrinal positions to be contrary to reason, highlighted weaknesses in their theology, and cited other scholars to challenge their views.[12] He observed that some major Ash'ari mutakallimin were uncertain about their own positions and attributed theological misunderstandings and intolerance in the Muslim world to Ash'aris.[12][13]

Shibli criticized the Asharite denial of natural causality, which held that God directly creates everything at every moment, arguing that this view undermines trust in natural laws and contradicts observable regularities.[14] He emphasized that humans understand natural causality through experience and scientific observation, and that these processes form part of a system created by God.[15] Shibli was particularly concerned with the Asharite approach to miracles, which he believed treated all events as divine interventions, making rare miracles indistinguishable from ordinary occurrences.[16] He noted that supernatural claims, including those by saints, magicians, or possessed individuals, were often presented alongside prophetic miracles, creating difficulties in judging their authenticity. To address this, he proposed guidelines for evaluating reports of past events: stronger evidence is required for rare or unusual occurrences; possibility alone does not imply certainty; rare events should not cast doubt on regular phenomena; and uncertain events should be judged by what is most probable. Shibli applied these principles to challenge widespread miracle stories, arguing that misreporting or misunderstanding is more likely than supernatural intervention.[16]

Legacy

The book faced both praise and controversy. Many scholars of his time accused Shibli of leaning toward Mu'tazilite thought,[17] and some even called the book incomplete.[18] His discussion on Prophethood led to a fatwa of takfir (a religious verdict of disbelief) against him, and several ulama refused to accept him as a religious authority.[18] Due to these differences and criticisms, Shibli resigned from his position at Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama in 1913.[19]

Despite the criticism, many modern scholars regard *Ilm-ul-Kalam* as a pioneering work. Abdul Hafiz of Indira Gandhi National Open University described it as 'an extremely unique book' and 'a primary source' on the history of Kalam.[20] Shaista Khatoon of Veer Bahadur Singh Purvanchal University noted that Shibli's presentation and introduction of major theologians reflected exceptional scholarly ability.[21] Saeed Ansari observed that the information contained in its few pages surpasses what could be gathered from thousands of other works on the subject.[21]

Other scholars have highlighted its intellectual and linguistic aspects. Zafar Ahmad Siddiqi stated that, in the context of Kalam's history, its information has no parallel in Urdu, according it the status of a primary source.[22] Abdul Lateef Azmi remarked that Shibli not only introduced Urdu to a new field of knowledge but also rendered an important service to religion.[1] Mohd Jafar Ahrari of Jawaharlal Nehru University noted its comprehensiveness, stating that even after reading thousands of pages, such a vast repository of knowledge is rarely found.[5]

Md Jamil Akhtar of Lalit Narayan Mithila University wrote that no theologian before Shibli in India had combined reason and logic so effectively to defend the faith.[23] Mehdi Afadi described *Ilm-ul-Kalam* as one of Shibli's most important works, using the metaphor that he 'contained the ocean in a jar' and opened a new branch of knowledge in Urdu.[24] Sabahuddin Abdur Rahman observed that both *Ilm-ul-Kalam* and *Al-Kalam* are true reflections of Shibli's thought.[24]

Sirajul Haq of Delhi University affirmed that this was the first Urdu work on Kalam, explaining its relevance in scholarly debate, especially among the ulama.[25] Baqar Hassan Syed added that its true value lies in presenting a creative attempt to make the Islamic tradition respond to evolving ideas of truth and morality while reflecting the challenges faced by reformers who sought to speak with authority on religion.[26]

See also

- Deobandi theological works

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